

ELEPHANT-TAMER SILK, VIIIth CENTURY

Silk weaving, with a representation of a man holding two elephants by the trunk: "The Elephant-tamer Silk." Byzantine, VIIIth century.

Dimensions: horizontal diameter of medallion, including border: 33.5 × 20 cm.

Colours: 1) Rich, dark, violet-purple ground.  
2) Leaf green (cape, elephants, lions and ground of spandrels).  
3) Pearl-white.  
4) Bright orange-yellow (hair, outlines and crescent).

**T**HIS fragment was bought in Paris in 1927. No information is available on its history.<sup>1</sup> No other fragment of this particular textile is known to us. Its design and colour-scheme place it in the main current of Byzantine art, and it presents marked peculiarities linking it with a number of silks, all of them either in, or having come from European church treasures.

There is no irrefutable proof that any of these silks were woven at Constantinople, nor is there anything more than a presumption, based on the place of discovery (in the case of those found in Egypt), or on style, to warrant the attribution of any given Byzantine or Near-Eastern textile to any particular locality until we come to the great Xth century silks with inwoven inscriptions stating them to be products of the imperial looms. However, it is known from literary sources that Justinian made Constantinople the headquarters of the silk industry; Procopius accuses the Emperor of ruining the ancient silk trade of Tyre and Berytus by creating a monopoly under the imperial treasury. It would no doubt be going too far to argue that subsequently silk was woven nowhere else in the Empire. For all we know the treasury may have set up manufactories in the provinces and there may have been clandestine weaving. But it is reasonable to suppose that the products of the capital were of the first quality. With regard to textiles, as well as other branches of art, the rôle of Constantinople has probably been underestimated. The more material comes to light, the more indications there are to show unity of style throughout the Empire: a style determined by the capital, and so powerful that it survives for generations in outlying provinces after they have been lost to Byzantium, in Europe as well as in Egypt and Asia Minor. Local tendencies can be discerned here and there, no doubt, but more usually in inferior productions. Generally speaking, the better the object, the less there is to identify it with any provincial center.

<sup>1</sup> It was exhibited in London in 1931 and is mentioned but not reproduced in the Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Persian Art, 1931, Third Edition, p. 36, No. 38, O: "Silk tissue. King holding elephants. Found at Rayy. Seljuk, X-XI cent. 36 × 20 cm. Lent by Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss."

We have been unable to discover on what grounds the authors of the catalogue base their assertion that this fragment was found at Rayy. But even if it was found at Rayy, it would not thereby be proved to be Seljuk, X-XI cent., or even to have been woven in Persia. Textiles were frequently exported in the middle ages, to far distant lands: e.g. from the Mediterranean area to Chinese Turkestan, or from China to Egypt. As will be seen from the present paper, we do not consider that this silk is Persian in style.

The Elephant-tamer silk, to give it a convenient name, is an eminent example of the metropolitan style (pl. 1). In design, in decorative conception, it represents a later development of the art that produced, in the VIth century, the well-known Quadriga silk, generally considered to be a product of Constantinople, one fragment of which is in the Musée de Cluny<sup>2</sup> and another in the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle. In both these silks (the Quadriga and the Elephant-tamer), wheels or medallions, connected by links, enclose the main subject, and the spandrels are adorned with animals. The frontal pose of the chief personage is much the same in both cases, as is the relation between the personage and the wheel in which he is framed. The differences are those produced by the VIIth and VIIIth century invasion of the Byzantine domain by the semi-fabulous fauna of the barbarian North and of the East, and by some two centuries of stylisation: the Elephant-tamer's hair and his dress are schematised into a formal pattern. Note, however, that although the garment is highly stylised, the artist has skilfully contrived to indicate the movement of the arms, and that the hands are expressively drawn. The colour of the Elephant-tamer is more varied and subtle than that of the earlier weaving, with its two tones.

The subject of the Quadriga silk, taken from the consular games, is thoroughly Byzantine. It occurs on imperial medallions, as witness the superb one of Constantius II preserved in the Rila Monastery, in Bulgaria,<sup>3</sup> and those of Maurice, 250 years later, in the Morgan collection at the Metropolitan Museum.<sup>4</sup> No less Byzantine is the adaptation of this solemn, frontal figure to other subjects in which an Oriental flavour, real or fancied, has caused some confusion as to their origin. The arts of Byzantium and of Persia are full of subjects and motifs borrowed by one from the other; but each art reveals its own essential character in the treatment. Take for example the celebrated shroud of St. Victor at Sens (pl. 2), which has been classified by Falke as Persian, on the basis of the subject. Its Byzantine character emerges strongly when one compares the head and shoulders of the lion-strangler, his face, his hair, his chest-ornament, with an exquisite bust-fragment at Sens (pl. 3A) whose Byzantine origin no one disputes,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> H. Peirce et R. Tyler, *L'Art Byzantin*, II, Paris, 1934, Pl. 187 a).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., *L'Art Byzantin*, I, Paris, 1932, Pl. 29 b).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., II, Pl. 187 b).

<sup>5</sup> The extremely close resemblance between this silk and the so-called Bahram silks (pl. 8) at Berlin and Nuremberg, which have hitherto been ascribed to Persia, raises a problem which is outlined in an article we contributed to the *Burlington Magazine*, May 1936 (Vol. 68), pp. 213-220, and is discussed at length in H. Peirce et R. Tyler, *L'Art Byzantin*, Tome III (in the press). Note that the drawing of the eyes, schematised roughly into hexagons,

and with imperial coins (pl. 3B) of the VIIIth century, from Justinian II's second reign on, and particularly those of Anastasius II (713) and Constantine V (740–775).<sup>6</sup> Persian art has no such representations to show. Now, the similarity of pose and of composition between the Sens lion-strangler (St. Victor) and the Elephant-tamer, is no less striking than is that of countenance. The outer pearl-border of the wheels is almost identical in the two silks.

The spandrel-ornament in the shroud of St. Victor occurs, slightly modified, in a silk fragment decorated with addorsed lions (pl. 4) formerly in the Cathedral at Sion (Valais) and now in the Musée de Valère, also at Sion, which links up with the Elephant-tamer by the character of the ornament in the wheels: note the little trifid sprigs placed between each turn of the scroll. A version of this spandrel ornament is further to be found on an elephant silk (pl. 6) in the Schlossmuseum, Berlin (Nº 99,323), probably of Islamic origin, with wheels very near those of the St. Victor shroud, and other features connecting it with the group of which the lion silk at Nancy is the centre, and for which we suggest, in our *L'Art Byzantin*, Tome III, an origin further West than Falke's *Ost-Iran*. The colour scheme of the Sion fragment, its rich, dark purplish-blue, tawny orange and moon-lit whites, has a strong analogy with that of the Elephant-tamer. This colour scheme, with slight variations, is found in a number of silks resembling the Elephant-tamer in design and texture: for instance that (pl. 7) fashioned into a cushion for the gemmed cross of Paschal I (817–824) in the Vatican; that showing winged monsters in wheels, once in the Miquel y Badia collection and now in the Cooper Union (pl. 5), New York, and similar pieces in the Bargello and elsewhere.

Some additional light on the artistic character of the period that produced the Elephant-tamer silk is shed by a charioteer fragment in the Victoria and Albert Museum (pl. 10B), dating somewhere between the VIth century Aix-Cluny quadriga and our Elephant-tamer. Here the ground is a deep red, instead of violet purple. The other colours are green, white and yellow, as in the Elephant-tamer. The pose, the drawing of the face, the use of pearls strengthen the analogy. The movement to which we owe these silks may be followed to the point where it merges into a new style represented by the curious horse-silk (pl. 9) preserved in a binding in the library of Trier Cathedral. Note the deliquescent version of the pearl-border, the wheel scrolls still not unlike those of the Elephant-tamer, and the span-

and of the noses is closely similar in the Sens bust fragment and our Elephant-tamer, whose hands are drawn exactly as are those of "Bahram."

<sup>6</sup> W. W. Wroth, Imperial Byzantine coins in the British Museum. II, Pl. XLI–XLIV.

drel fillings constituting a sketchy simplification of the motifs presented by the Sion lion-silk and, in a still purer form, the shroud of St. Victor.

The evidence as to date supplied by the VIIIth century coins, the shroud of St. Victor which was the gift of Bishop Willicarius, in 769, and the silk forming a cushion for the cross of Paschal I († 824) seems sufficient to place the silks belonging to this class roughly in the VIIIth century, and to warrant the guess that the Trier horse-silk may be as late as the IXth. Further confirmation may be found in the peculiar scroll of the Elephant-tamer's wheel, closely resembling a motif in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, at Jerusalem,<sup>7</sup> dating from the end of the VIIth century (691). The colour-scheme of these silks has much in common with that used in other branches of art at the time: the yellow and orange with luminous pearls on a purple ground of the Jerusalem mosaics, for instance, and the similar combinations of tones in the apse mosaic in St. Sophia, Saloniki. One is even reminded of the orange-coloured hair of St. Demetrius, in his mosaic (pl. 11B) at Saloniki.

The colour-scheme of Byzantine silks evolves for centuries in a way recalling the hues of the seasons: the earliest weavings, dating from before the introduction of silk-growing in the Empire, with their small-scale patterns, monochrome or with gay combinations of tender crocus-like hues in which pinks, greens and whites often predominate, may stand for the springtime of the art.<sup>8</sup> Then, after the capture of the silk secret, come big pieces, flaunting in great masses the reds and golds of summer flowers, as witness the group of which the Annunciation and Nativity and the lion-tamer silks<sup>9</sup> are characteristic. Later, and particularly in the VIIIth century weavings which we group round the Elephant-tamer, we have the deep purples, the bronzed or tawny yellows, the altered greens of autumn. And then, before a new cycle starts in the Xth century, come the sere leaves of winter.<sup>10</sup> This suggestion of a parallel with the cycle of the seasons may strike the spectator in representative collections such as those of the Musée des Tissus at Lyons, the Cathedral of Sens, the Schlossmuseum at Berlin or the Victoria and Albert Museum.

For the VIIIth century, as for many periods of Byzantine history, the imperial coinage has constantly to be referred to for dated evidence as to current plastic ideas. For two centuries after Constantine's foundation of his capital, the Emperor's head appears on the coins almost invariably in pro-

<sup>7</sup> K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, Vol. I, Oxford, 1932, Pl. 4 b).

<sup>8</sup> H. Peirce et R. Tyler, *L'Art Byzantin*, Paris, I and II contain many examples of these.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II, Pl. 180 a, 181, 182, 184, 185.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, III (in the press) for a choice of these sombre monochrome weavings.

file. Later, from Justinian I on, full-face representations become more frequent, but the profile and the three-quarters profile appear occasionally down to the end of the Heraclian dynasty. Under Justinian II, the last of the Heraclians, full-face types are evolved, both of the Emperor and of Our Lord, which are to prevail throughout the Byzantine middle ages. The latest profile representations the Byzantine coinage has to show belong to Justinian II's first reign, except for a few insignificant half-*solidi* and one-third *solidi* (*semissi* and *tremissi*, which moreover are the coins on which the VIIth century profile types occur) attributable perhaps to the early VIIIth and certainly to provincial mints.

At the same time, at the close of the VIIth and beginning of the VIIIth century, the full-face begins to be treated with a regularity suggesting that the outlines were drawn with the compass: a convention of frontality, with its suggestion of a solemn and motionless dignity, that appears at the same time in enamels, in mosaic, in paintings, and not in human representations only, becoming so general that the epithet "compass-drawn" fits the art of the period. It may be of interest to see how this tendency affects human representations in other techniques, in objects dating from about the time to which we attribute the Dumbarton Oaks silk. Note the similarity of pose and expression, in orant, (pl. 11C) lion-strangler (pl. 2) and elephant-tamer. Besides two typical early VIIIth century coins (pl. 3B), we reproduce some enamels from the Fieschi casket (pl. 11A) and mosaics from St. Sophia (late VIIIth century) and St. Demetrius (about 700) at Saloniki (pls. 3D, 11B, C), a painting from Bawit (Egypt) of the late VIIth century (pl. 3C), some paintings (pl. 10A) in Sta. Maria Antiqua, Rome, in all likelihood the work of Greeks in the VIIIth century, a relief of Daniel in the lion's den (pl. 12) from Thasos, now in Istanbul, which we attribute to the VIIth century, and a slab (pl. 13) showing the wheel-system in barbarian hands, from the baptistery of Sicvald (Patriarch of Aquileia, 762-776) at Cividale. On this slab, note the rendering of the trees flanking the cross. With their symmetrical branches doubled by an inner groove, the bottom pair taking the form of an inverted rocker, each of these trees bears a surprising resemblance to the motif, groups of which, disposed star-wise, fill the spandrels between the wheels on the shroud of St. Victor. This likeness may be fortuitous, but the motif is so complicated that some kinship seems likely.<sup>11</sup> Interlacing designs are so common at the time that it is unnecessary to dwell on their presence, in a rather similar form, in the cross on the Sicvald slab and in the St. Victor wheels.

<sup>11</sup> See H. Peirce et R. Tyler, op. cit. Vol. II, Pl. 174 for another appearance of this motif, on a Coptic censer.

The late VIIth and the VIIIth centuries, as these examples may suggest, were a period of intense creative activity in the Empire, when new plastic conceptions were appearing in one technique after another and the forms were being worked out which were to be exploited to the full after the close of the iconoclastic controversy.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Persian Art, London, 1931. Third edition (revised).

O. von Falke. *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, Berlin, 1913 (2 vols.).

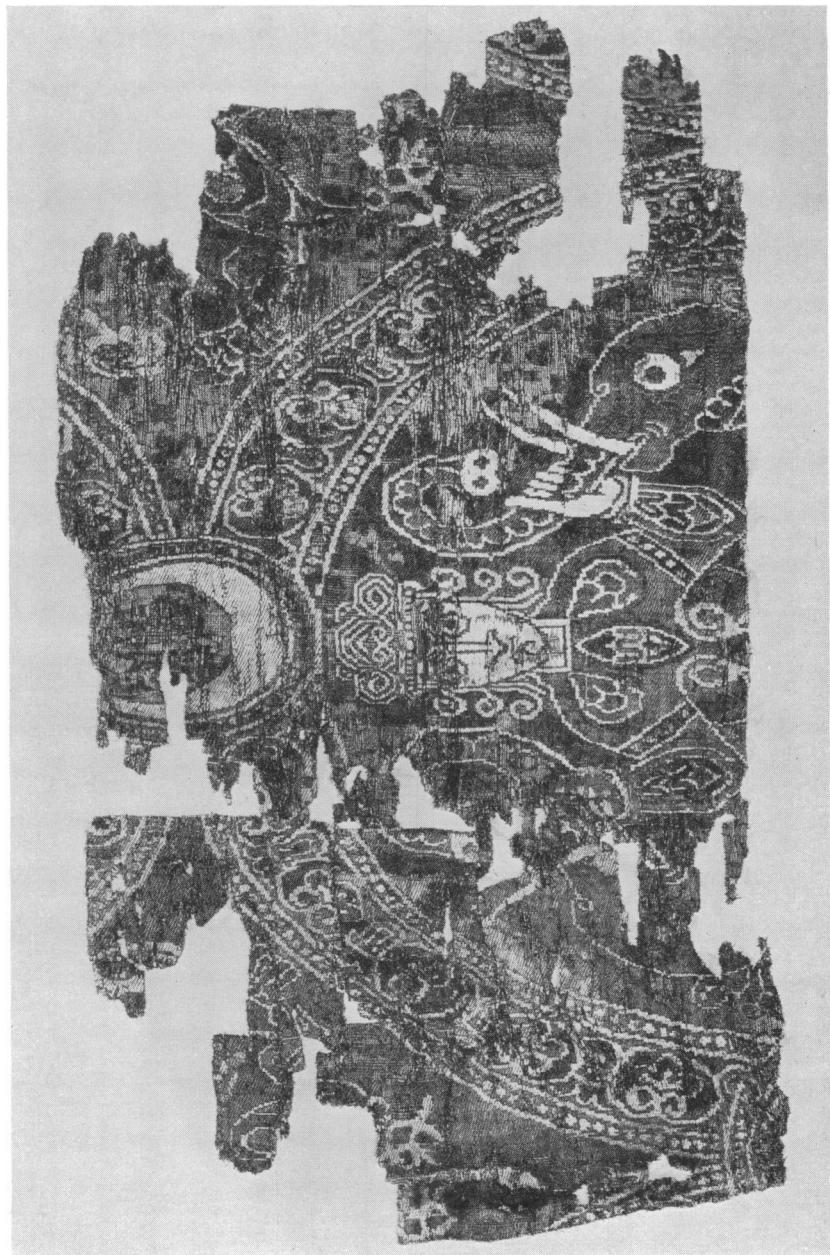
*L'Antico Tessuto d'Arte Italiano nella Mostra del Tessile Nazionale*. Roma, 1937-1938.

A. F. Kendrick. Victoria and Albert Museum, Dept. of Textiles. Catalogue of Early Medieval Woven Fabrics, 1925.

E. Chartraine. *Les Tissus Anciens du Trésor de la Cathédrale de Sens*. Paris (Champion) 1911. (Extrait de la Revue de l'Art Chrétien, 1911.)

H. Peirce et R. Tyler, *L'Art Byzantin*, Tome III (in the press).

1. ELEPHANT-TAMER SILK

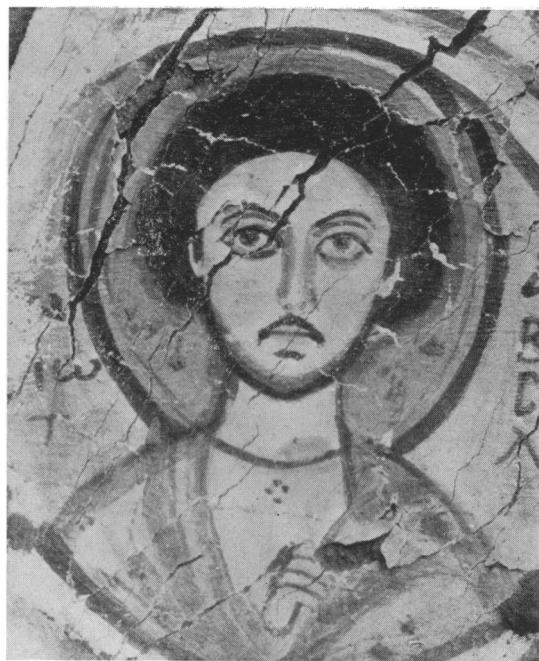




2. SHROUD OF ST. VICTOR,  
Sens Cathedral



3A. BUST, SILK, Sens Cathedral



3C. WALL PAINTING FROM BAWIT, EGYPT



3B. GOLD COINS OF  
JUSTINIAN II AND  
ANASTASIUSS II,

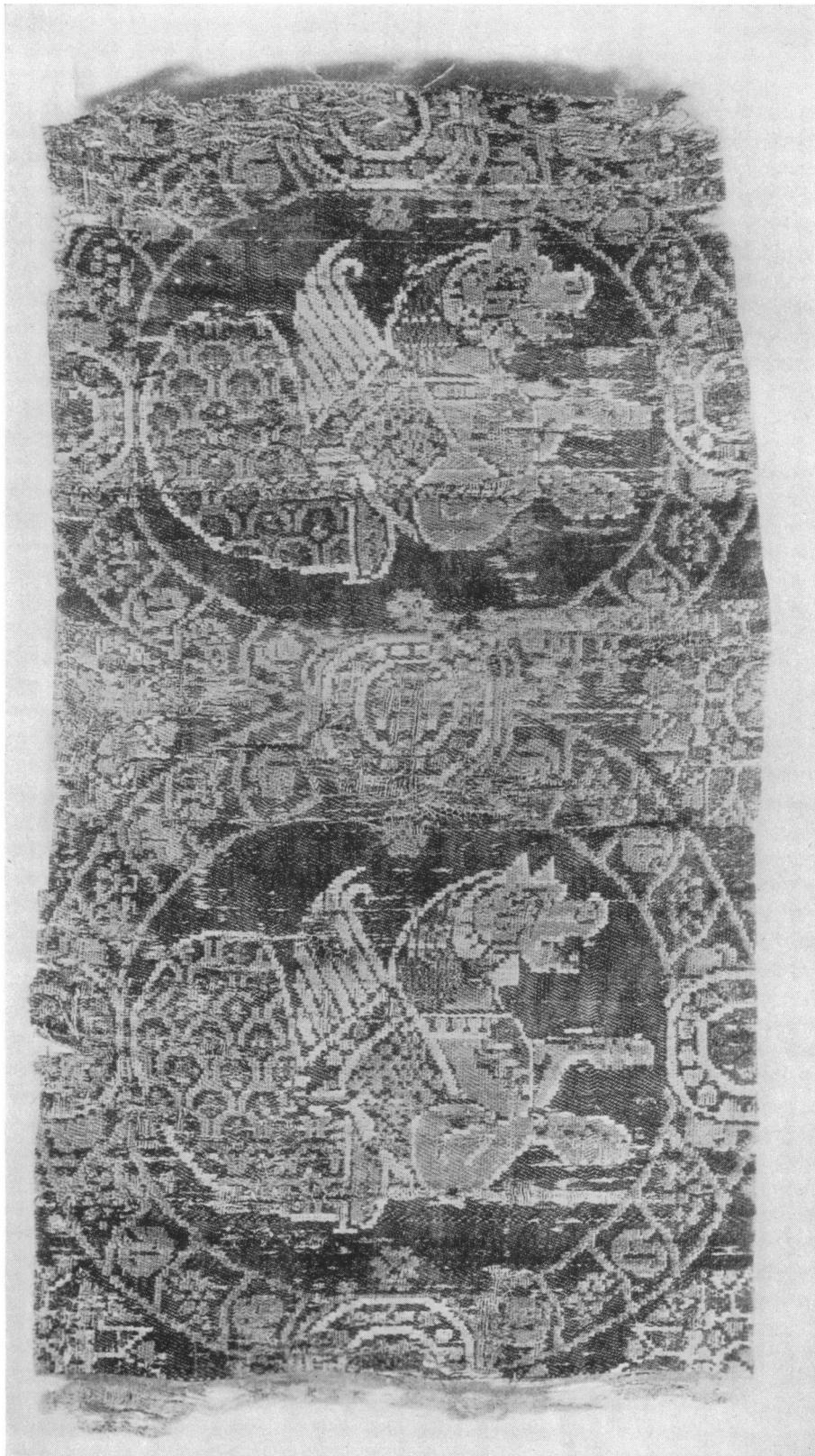
Cabinet des Médailles,  
Paris



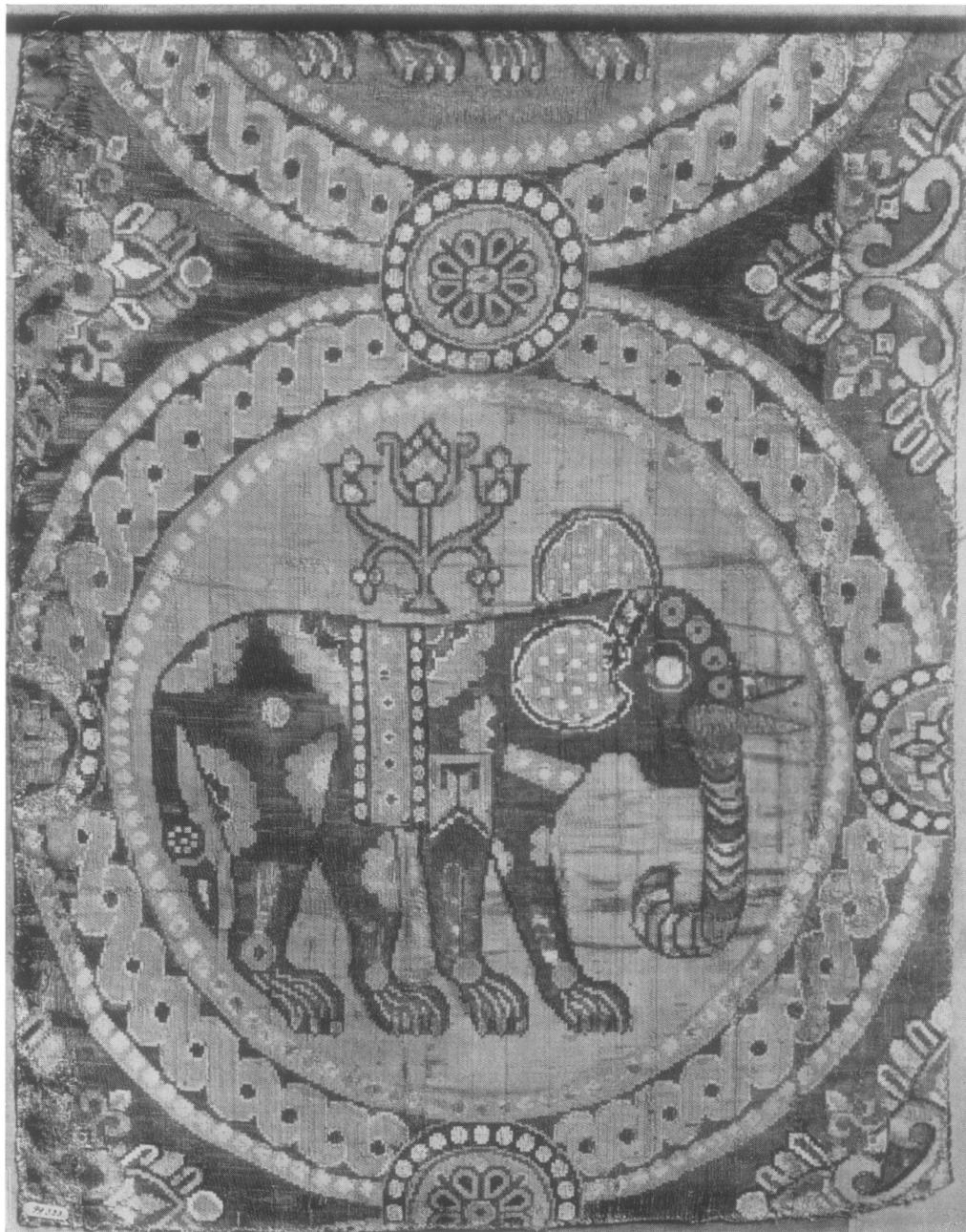
3D. MOSAIC, APSE OF ST. SOPHIA, SALONIKI



4. ADDORSED LIONS SILK,  
Musée de Valère (Valais)



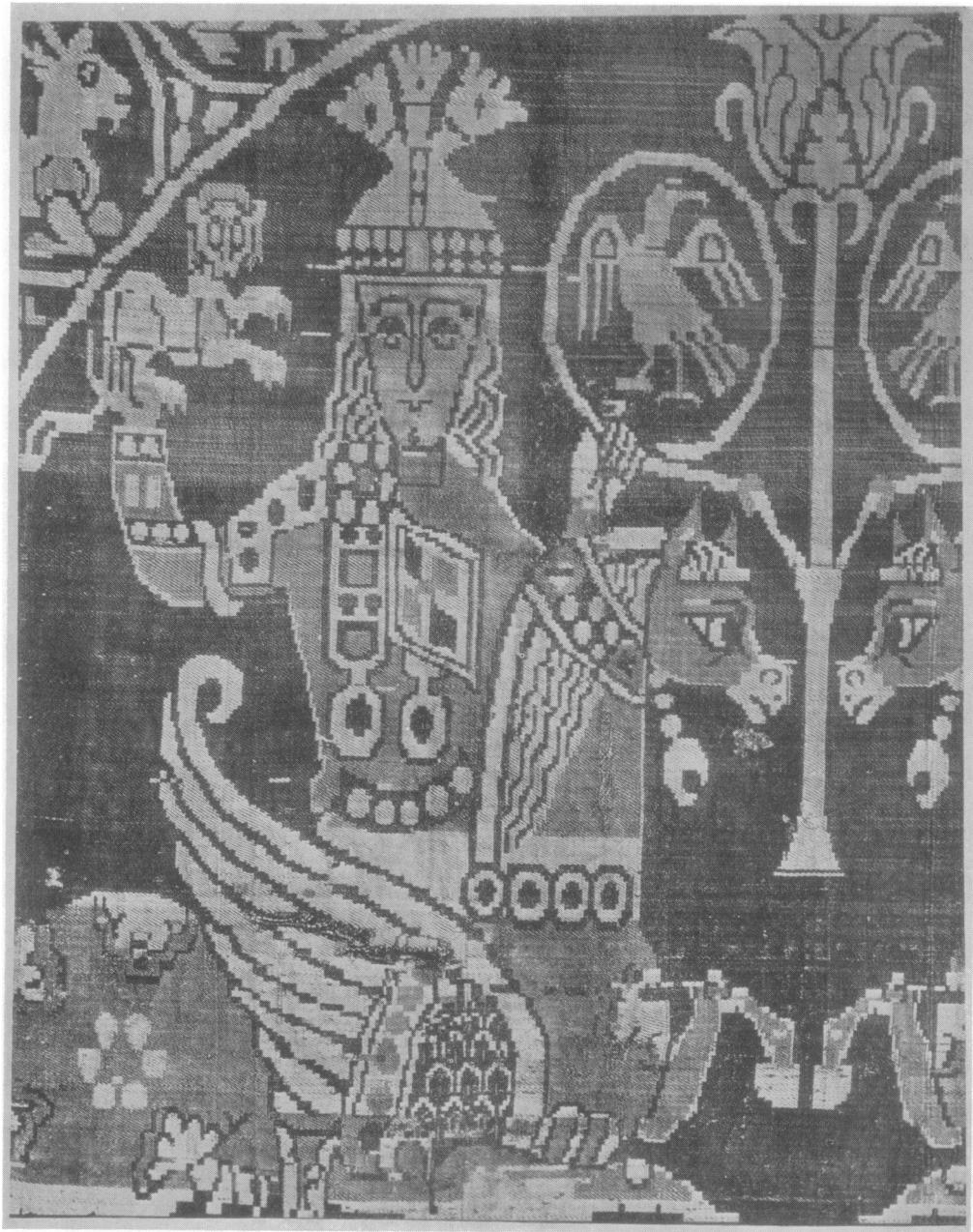
5. WINGED MONSTER SILK,  
Cooper Union, New York



6. ELEPHANT SILK,  
Schlossmuseum, Berlin



7. SILK CUSHION FOR PASCHAL I'S GEMMED CROSS,  
Museo Cristiano, Vatican



8. "BAHRAM" SILK,  
Schlossmuseum, Berlin



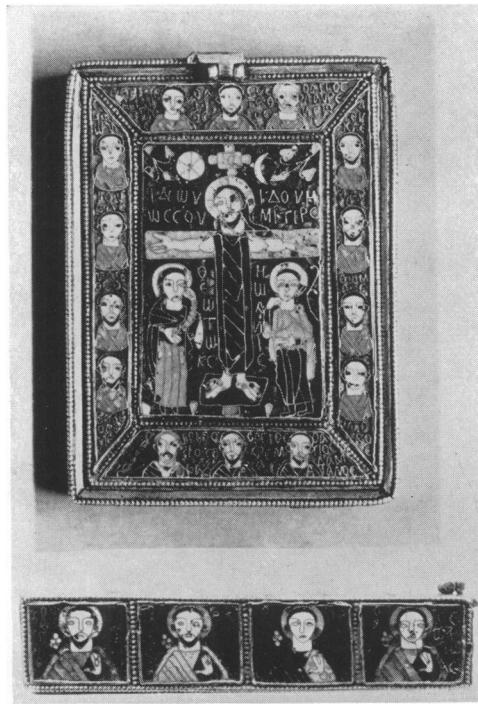
9. HORSE SILK,  
Trier Cathedral Library



10A. PAINTINGS IN STA. MARIA ANTIQUA, ROME



10B. CHARIOTEER SILK,  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London



11A. ENAMELS OF THE FIESCHI CASKET,  
Metropolitan Museum (Morgan Coll.), New York



11B. MOSAIC, BUST OF ST. DEMETRIUS, SALONIKI



11C. MOSAIC, ORANT, ST. DEMETRIUS, SALONIKI



12. MARBLE RELIEF OF DANIEL,  
Musée National des Antiquités, Istanbul



13. MARBLE SLAB,  
Cividale del Friuli, Cathedral